

Clinton NSC attacks Miniters; Claims bin Laden never offered up

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By Roger Cressey and Gayle Smith, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

As counterterrorism and foreign policy professionals and veterans of the NSC staff in the years proceeding September 11, we have heard our share of misstatements and conspiracy theories about terrorism. But nothing quite compares to Richard Miniters' book "Losing Bin Laden," which includes a number of erroneous allegations about the Clinton administration's counterterrorism record, many of which were then published in this newspaper. Let us address a few:

First, Mr. Miniters recycles old, false Sudanese claims that the Clinton White House declined access to Sudan's intelligence files on al Qaeda and that an unnamed CIA official declined an offer from Sudan in 1996 to turn Osama bin Laden over to the United States.

No one should believe these allegations by Mr. Miniters' source, Fateh Erwa - a Sudanese intelligence officer known for his penchant to deceive - that there was an offer to hand bin Laden over to the United States. Certainly, no offer was ever conveyed to any senior official in Washington. Had the Sudanese been serious about offering bin Laden to the United States, they could have communicated such an offer to any number of senior Clinton administration officials. It did not happen.

Mr. Miniters also claims that Sudan repeatedly tried to provide voluminous intelligence files on bin Laden to the CIA, the FBI, and senior Clinton administration officials and would be "repeatedly rebuffed through both formal and informal channels." Absurd. In fact, it was precisely the other way around.

On multiple occasions, and in venues ranging from Addis Ababa to Virginia, Washington, New York and Khartoum, the United States aggressively pressed the Sudanese to prove their alleged commitment to cooperating on terrorism, by severing their close ties with known terrorists, arresting specific individuals and providing specific intelligence information to us. Yet, despite frequent promises of cooperation, presumably in the hopes of getting off the terrorism list and out from under U.N. sanctions, the Sudanese consistently failed to deliver.

This should come as no surprise, because Sudan in the mid-'90s was one of the most hard-core terrorist states in the world. Its fiercely militant leader, Hassan Turabi, turned Sudan into a sanctuary, training base and active supporter for a range of Islamic terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda.

That Mr. Miniters so willingly credits bogus claims from the Sudanese regime - a regime the Bush administration has rightly kept on the terrorism list, that has done nothing to bring an end to their domestic slave trade, and has only recently begun to engage seriously in international efforts

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to bring an end to a civil war that has killed over two million Sudanese citizens - is deeply troubling.

Another charge in the book is that President Clinton failed to retaliate immediately after the bombing of the USS Cole in October 2000 despite the fact that responsibility for the attack was clear. Mr. Minitzer cites this as part of his overall and unsubstantiated theory that Mr. Clinton "refused to wage a real war on terrorism."

When the USS Cole was hit in October 2000, al Qaeda was a prime suspect. But other terrorist groups and states which had attacked us before were also potentially responsible.

It was appropriate that Mr. Clinton wanted conclusions from his chief intelligence and law enforcement agencies before launching broad retaliatory strikes on al Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan. Definitive conclusions from the CIA and FBI on who was behind the Cole were not provided to Mr. Clinton for the remainder of his term.

Even without conclusions from the FBI and CIA on the Cole, bin Laden and his lieutenants were still hunted to the last day of Mr. Clinton's presidency for al Qaeda's 1998 attacks on our two embassies in Africa. And if the Clinton administration dropped the ball in responding to the Cole bombing, why didn't the incoming Bush administration pick it up in January, 2001?

Mr. Minitzer also alleges that in the spring and summer of 1998 the Clinton administration was deadlocked over the decision to conduct a special forces mission near a bin Laden camp. Mr. Minitzer suggests that the president did not want to overrule Pentagon concerns over risks because he could not "stomach sending thousands of troops into harm's way." Mr. Clinton was, in fact, ready and willing to undertake a special forces or other paramilitary assault on bin Laden, particularly after our missile attacks on bin Laden in the summer of 1998, and often pressed his senior military advisers for options. But Mr. Clinton's top military and intelligence advisers concluded that a commando raid was likely to be a failure, given the potential for detection, in the absence of reliable, predictive intelligence on bin Laden's whereabouts.

Mr. Clinton approved every request made of him by the CIA and the U.S. military involving using force against bin Laden and al Qaeda. As President Bush well knows, bin Laden was and remains very good at staying hidden.

For eight years the Clinton administration fought hard to counter terrorism, and while we didn't accomplish all that we hoped, we had some important successes. The current administration faces many of the same challenges.

Confusing the American people with misinformation and distortions will not generate the support we need to come together as a nation and defeat our terrorist enemies.

Roger Cressey served as National Security Council senior director for counterterrorism from 1999-2001. Gayle Smith served as special assistant to the president for African affairs from 1998-2001.

Miniter responds; Quotes Clintonites to prove his case

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By Richard Miniter, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Denial is more than a river in Egypt. It runs through the Clinton administration's Sudan policy.

As the media attention on my book "Losing bin Laden" grows and it climbs the New York Times bestseller list, some former Clinton officials have emerged to deny the undeniable. [See Op-Ed at left.] They deny that Sudan ever offered to arrest bin Laden and turn him over to American justice, they deny that Sudan ever offered to share its intelligence files on bin Laden's terror network, and they offer excuses for President Clinton's failure to retaliate following bin Laden's attack on the USS Cole [which killed 17 sailors]. Since the facts and the on-the-record accounts of senior Clinton officials are against them, they are reduced to parsing words and obfuscatory statements. That's unfortunate. The point of examining Mr. Clinton's flawed war on terror is not to condemn the former president, but to learn from his successes and his setbacks and apply those lessons to the current phase of America's war on terror.

In that spirit, let's examine the record and see how well those denials hold up.

* Arresting bin Laden. They write nearby that "no offer was ever conveyed to any senior official in Washington." Does Sandy Berger, the former National Security Advisor, count as a senior official in Washington? Here is what Mr. Berger told the Washington Post's Barton Gellman: "The FBI did not believe we had enough evidence to indict bin Laden at that time and therefore opposed bringing him to the United States." If there was no offer, just what offer was the FBI evaluating and opposing? Or is Mr. Berger telling tall tales?

Other senior Clinton officials are on the record debating the merits of taking bin Laden into custody from Sudan. Susan Rice, an assistant secretary of state under Mr. Clinton, told the Village Voice: "They [the Sudanese] calculated that we didn't have the means to successfully prosecute bin Laden. That's why I question the sincerity of the offer."

You can't doubt the sincerity of an offer that doesn't exist. Perhaps the Clinton administration overlooked that Sudan had handed over the infamous terrorist, Carlos the Jackal, to the French. He now sits in a French prison, while bin Laden is free. As Ambassador Timothy Carney argued in 1996, even if the offer wasn't serious, why not call Sudan's bluff? If Sudan failed to deliver, then the skeptics are proven right. If Sudan did hand bin Laden over, then Mr. Clinton would strike a blow against international terrorism.

And, of course, Sudan did make good on its word to expel bin Laden from that country in May 1996 - at the Clinton administration's request. If Sudan could expel bin Laden, why couldn't it arrest him?

* Sudan's intelligence files. Some Clinton administration officials deny that Sudan offered to provide its intelligence files on bin Laden. In my research, I've uncovered letters by senior

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Sudanese officials, including one from that nation's president, addressed to President Clinton, top Clinton officials and senior members of Congress expressly offering those files. Besides, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced in September 1997 that she was sending a team to Sudan to re-engage Sudan on terrorism issues. They planned to examine those files. That promising initiative was overturned by the White House six days later. Whose fault was that?

* The USS Cole. They admit that "al Qaeda was a prime suspect," but say more investigation was needed to prove bin Laden guilty. They ignore that the CIA had traced phone calls from the attackers to a house in Yemen and from that house to bin Laden's satellite phone, and traced \$5,000 sent to the terrorists from bin Laden. Yes, the investigation was ongoing, but that should have been enough. They forget that America's enemies are not in a court of law, but are waging war on us. And, even if they weren't sure that bin Laden was behind the attack, there was blood on his hands. Bin Laden's network killed 59 Americans in the Clinton years. The retaliation plan developed by the Clinton administration would have smashed all of his terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan - less than a year before September 11.

After September 11, some Clinton officials admitted their mistakes. Jamie Gorelick, a deputy attorney general in the Clinton Justice Department, told the Boston Globe: "Clearly, not enough was done. We should have caught this. Why this happened, I don't know . . . We should have prevented this." Nancy Soderberg, a member of Clinton's National Security Council, added: "In hindsight, it wasn't enough, and anyone involved in policy would have to admit that."

Madeleine Albright recently told Bill O'Reilly, "edo you think we're so stupid that, if somebody had offered us Osama bin Laden, we would haven't taken it?"

Madam Secretary, that is now for the American people to judge.

Richard Minitzer is the author of the New York Times bestseller "Losing bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror" [Regnery, Sept. 2003] and a senior fellow at the Centre for the New Europe in Brussels.

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